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ABSTRACT

In this transcript from a National Public Radio "Options in Education" broadcast, Uri Bronfenbrenner, professor of psychology and family sociology at Cornell University, discusses his three "Preposterous Propositions" for strengthening American family structure and society. Each of Bronfenbrenner's propositions is presented and explained, including that: (1) all American workers cut down their work to three-quarters time and spend more time at home; (2) increase the number of women occupying positions of decision making power in society; and (3) the first two propositions, with all their implications, will happen now. Reactions of workers to Bronfenbrenner's propositions are given and the propositions are discussed by Bronfenbrenner and the cohosts of the radio program. (NRB)

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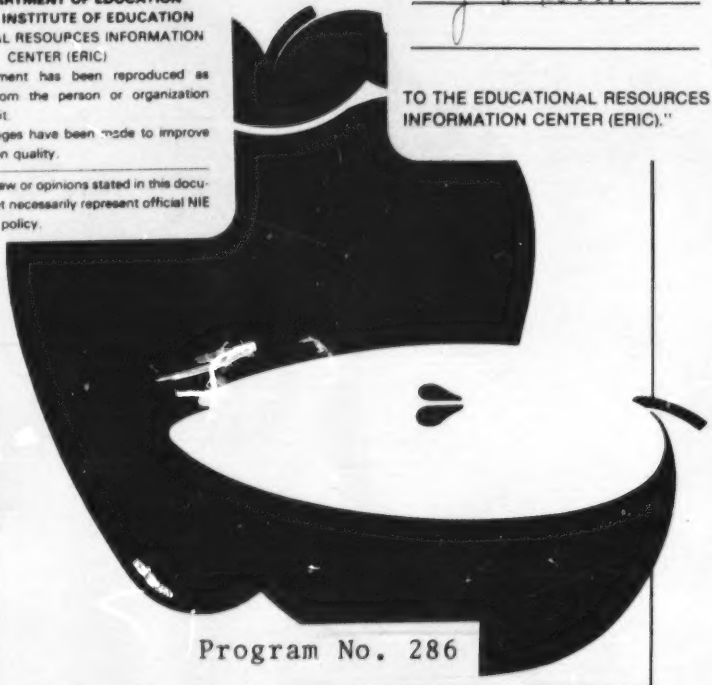

Program No. 286

OPTIONS IN EDUCATION

takes listeners to the core of the issues

"Portrait of Urie Bronfenbrenner"

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"BRONFENBRENNER FANTASY"

Uri Bronfenbrenner, professor of psychology and family sociology at Cornell University, discusses his three "Preposterous Propositions" for strengthening American family structure and society.

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Bronfenbrenner: I've been saying for a decade now, things have to get worse before they can get better. Well, I have good news. I think we've made it. I think things have gotten worse. I think people are beginning to think twice.

Reinhardt: Things have gotten worse? How could that be good news? To a realist it doesn't make sense.

Merrow: To a dreamer it might. I'm John Merrow.

Reinhardt: I'm Barbara Reinhardt, for NPR's OPTIONS IN EDUCATION.

Merrow: On this program, some ideas for making things better, for strengthening American family structure, and, through that, society. Ideas from Cornell professor Uri Bronfenbrenner, who studies psychology and family sociology.

Reinhardt: As valuable as his ideas as a social scientist may be, it's Bronfenbrenner's vision as a dreamer we share with you today.

PREPOSTEROUS PROPOSITION 1

Bronfenbrenner: Well, I'll tell you what kind of a world we should have. The chances of our getting it, mind you, are slim. I'll give you three preposterous propositions. Okay, the first proposition is, it has to become a custom in American society that everybody, men and women, work only three-quarters time. That's preposterous proposition number one. That means the other quarter of your time you have for life. You know, you can live, you can play with your kids, you can visit with the neighbors, you can enjoy the flowers, and so forth and so on.

Reinhardt: Essentially you're saying that six hours a day is enough for anybody.

Bronfenbrenner: Yeah! Well, not only that, but think what that would do. We have a major problem of unemployment. If we were all working three-quarters time, we'd need some manpower and womanpower, you know, to do the jobs. That would take care of the unemployment problem. Right?

Reinhardt: But we wouldn't make enough money!

Bronfenbrenner: We wouldn't make enough money to have two cars you mean? Three television sets? Now, I told you this is impossible. But the question is, how much violence and vandalism and crime in the streets and inability to read and all these other things that are the consequence of the fact that we don't have the time and the opportunity to make an investment in living--how much of that are we going to be able to put up with? I mean, pretty soon it's going to be very difficult to live in a big city. It's already not easy. It's dangerous and it's not very pleasant.

Reinhardt: Are you suggesting that if we all had two hours extra that somehow that would stop crime in the streets?

Bronfenbrenner: Hmmm. It would only stop crime in the

streets if that's--if that was the reason why we decided that we wanted to work only three-quarters time. That is, one thing that might happen if we worked three-quarters time is that everybody would start moonlighting and go down and, you know, play pool and go for a trip, I don't know what. They might not necessarily put that time into kids or family life or talking to the neighbors or, as I call it, reweaving the social fabric. Part of the problem is that we Americans have forgotten what makes the world tick. We have been so busy pursuing the gross national product--I've always thought that was very well named!--that we've forgotten that the capacity to produce the gross national product is a skill that one learns in families, that the notion of doing a piece of work is something you learn when you're--from your family, in a family setting. And we're in danger of, you know, killing the goose that lays the golden egg. So the--just making the time available doesn't guarantee that it will be used for these kinds of purposes. We have to rediscover the wheel. We have to rediscover the fact that the time we spend with each other in families, in communities, and neighborhoods, in friendship, is time very practically invested. That it has monetary payoffs. I mean, that's what it's got to have before you're going to really believe in it. Right? Well, it does, it has monetary payoffs--in addition to having some nice fringe benefits like love, you know. What I'm pointing out is that quality of production is something which one learns in a family. And as you cease to invest in the kinds of conditions that are necessary to support families, you end up by having to pay a lot of money. Particularly you're going to have to be carrying a tremendous load on the welfare rolls. That is, people who are not able to be productive. And that's not their doing. It's our doing because we are unwilling, so far, to recognize the hard realities of the fact that human beings become human only under certain conditions. And we're not willing to invest in those conditions. Now, the investment doesn't take very much. And you get a tremendous payoff from it once you make the investment. But I think, my sense is that we're going to make it, as we Americans characteristically do, we're going to make it by the skin of our teeth. You know, we got out of the Great Depression by the skin of our teeth, we got out of the Vietnam war by the skin of our teeth, we're going to get out of this one, maybe, I hope, by the skin of our teeth.

Merrow: Would Dr. Bronfenbrenner's idea--cutting the workday to six hours--actually bring people closer together? We asked people what they'd do with the extra time. Few were as idealistic as Bronfenbrenner.

Serviceman 1: I'd probably watch a little bit more TV. Sort of rough to say.

Reinhardt: A delivery serviceman.

Serviceman 1: Having just two more hours a day rather than having another day off--giving you just--with just the two hours I'd probably just stay home and watch TV.

Goldfield: Okay.

Serviceman 1: It wouldn't change what I'd do that much.

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Goldfield: Let's change these rules a little bit then. Now you have a day off a week. You're going to work four days instead of five. You've got a whole day.

Serviceman 1: I'd go out into the country probably, or maybe get a second job.

Goldfield: That's against the rules. You can't get a second job. You've got to have this time and you've got to spend it in your community somehow, with people you like, something like that. It's leisure time. You can't get another job.

Serviceman 1: I'd go out into the country and walk my dog. That's what I usually do on the weekends now anyway. I'm working closer to 50 hours than I am to 40 each week, and I don't see how I could make it by in any less amount of time working.

Goldfield: What he says is if we all got closer together we'd need a lot less material goods. We could share things. And so you would need less money than you have.

Serviceman 1: I own very few material things.

Goldfield: What do you have?

Serviceman 1: A black and white TV which is about ten years old. A stereo receiver, but I haven't been able to afford a turntable. I own a lot of records, and a car that's about ready to die any day now.

Goldfield: That's what you own, and yet you work 50 hours a week doing work that you don't like? That's what you have to show for it?

Serviceman 1: That's about it. That and a lot of empty six-packs! That's it!

Goldfield: So, doesn't that make you want to believe in what this man is saying? I mean--

Serviceman 1: Oh, sure, I'd love to have to work less hours a week and have more spending power and own the bed that I'm sleeping in. I'd love it.

Serviceman 2: His idea is to try to make people pull together, work less hours, and get more out of it? That's what he's trying to do? And how far has he went with this? Just starting out, just talking about ideas? It's a good idea if he could do it.

Serviceman 1: It's not what this country is based on though. The country's based on capitalism, and that's all against capitalism there. But I really couldn't see it happening in the United States at all.

Merrow: Those blue collar workers found Bronfenbrenner's ideas hard to fathom. So did this researcher. He couldn't imagine working only six hours a day.

Researcher: Well, I guess I'm at the beginning of my career,

so that I see a lot of the things that I spent a lot of time on as investments in the future. I'm in a new kind of job. I switched from an academic position to a strictly research firm and I'm learning a lot about writing proposals and doing research and doing things much more quickly than I used to. And I'm hoping that the payoff will be that I will be more marketable in the future and have more geographic mobility.

Reinhardt: If you had children, would you do these kinds of things every so often?

Researcher: I don't know. I don't have children so that I will be able to do these sorts of things. I suspect that if I did, probably not. My wife works too, so that we have limited resources for taking care of children or--like I said, we have a new dog and I am amazed at how much of a strain that is, to know that someone has to be home at a certain time to feed it and walk it and so on. And I'm sure that's just a mild dose of the responsibilities involved in having children and just--I can't imagine dealing with that strain and trying to work the same hours and things.

Cafeteria worker: I think I'd spend mine at home with my family.

Merrow: A cafeteria worker.

Cafeteria worker: With working the hours that I work now, there is very little time I have with my family.

Goldfield: How many hours do you work a week?

Cafeteria worker: Uh, forty and o.t. That's unlimited. It don't have no certain time. Some days I put in like 5:30 to 5, or 5:30 to 3:30, so that don't leave much out in time at home with my family. My family consists of two young grandchildren, and so I could really fulfill my off time with the younger grandchildren.

Goldfield: What would you do with them?

Cafeteria worker: Well, there's a lot of programs we could have together, like if no more than just family talks.

Goldfield: How would you plan a day, knowing that you were only working six hours, or knowing that you were working four regular days and then having one off?

Cafeteria worker: First I'd see that my--as I have so stated--and am playing around my grandchildren. I would see that they were awakened, see that as now they don't have someone there to see that they eat a substantial breakfast. I would see to that. By that time it would be time to maybe start cleaning their room, my rooms, planning your afternoon meals, and outlining for the next day.

Goldfield: Sounds like you're spending all your extra time in work. Would you ever play with them?

Cafeteria worker: It would be a thing that you couldn't do in your home, which a woman can always find something to do at

home. But as working the hours that you work now your home would be neglected.

Goldfield: And you think it would be worth it if people had a little less money or fewer things?

Cafeteria worker: I think, I think with a little less it would be a little less stress. Because now I'm making money, but I don't have the time that I want with my family.

PREPOSTEROUS PROPOSITION 2

Merrow: Uri Bronfenbrenner's prescription for improving community goes beyond spending more time at home.

Bronfenbrenner: Oh, my second preposterous proposition is even more preposterous! I said the first one was everybody's going to work three-quarters time. You can imagine what the fat chance that has! Well, my second proposition is that that will never come about unless we get into a situation where increasing numbers of women occupy positions of decision making power in our society. Now the reasoning for that is--not that women biologically are smarter--although they may be, but I don't want to concede that! What I'm arguing is the way that men are brought up in our society is they are so sheltered they don't know the hard realities. They don't understand this matter of investment of human potential. They don't know--they don't understand that it's necessary, for example, to provide adequate day care facilities. They don't understand that that's a sound investment. They don't understand that it's important to introduce practices in business that permit flexibility of schedules and so on. Women do. And they do because they've been there, they've seen, they know the cost and they know the benefits. So that when women get in positions of power and decision making, they make sensible decisions, whereas we men don't.

Reinhardt: Would women always make those sensible decisions if they get into those positions? Because then maybe they'll forget the family part.

Bronfenbrenner: Yes, or the family, or they'll forget the realities of community life, or they'll forget how important it is to take a little time off now and then, and all those things that hard headed people know about. Well, that's a risk, and certainly when the feminist movement first began, the women's movement with its--much of that rhetoric really said, "We can do anything you can do better." You know. "We can outscheme, we can outfight, we can outcheat," and all the rest of it. It didn't last very long. I guess it was now over a year ago that Betty Friedan, you know, wrote that article in the New York Times saying the meaning of the women's movement is caring. Well, that's, that's pretty mature. I mean, there is a recognition on the part of the militant women's movement that caring in our society is getting forgotten. And caring is very important. I don't think it is going to happen. It might happen in some other countries. I don't think it will happen here. I may be wrong. But I do not see as I watch as women become, for example--get into

positions in local, state and federal government, those that I know--I don't find them selling out to the male--to the old male values. So I'm hopeful. At any rate, I think the likelihood that men will come to their senses first is much slimmer. So I think what we have to do is to reinvent the wheel, reinvent community, establish the linkages between the home and the school and the neighborhood and the world of work so that they are not separate worlds the way they have become. Well, it's going to be interesting to see how the story ends, don't you think?

Merrow: We asked people about this element of Bronfenbrenner's fantasy--that having more women in power could make society more humane. We encountered skepticism and resistance.

Serviceman 1: It might do something that way, but then again, it would take the American family more apart. It would break it up more, it would--instead of going home and having your mother there or somewhere where the family nucleus is, you would have the mother out all the time, you'd have the father out all the time and--

Goldfield: But don't forget, we're adding more time now. Between the mother and the father there is four extra hours a day that they don't have to work. So the family might not be ripped apart, right?

Serviceman 1: Uh, no I would still see it as a family being taken apart and six hours a day really wouldn't make that much difference.

Merrow: He resists the idea of women working at all. But many women do work. If more of them attained positions of authority would they bring nurturing skills with them? This white collar worker says no. Women don't get to top level positions early enough.

Woman: I think that if their children are grown they will have forgotten it. That hard part of their life is all over with, and I don't think that there are going to be that many young women who have small children that are going to be in those positions who are going to still be very aware that those difficulties exist. It's very easy to say well, that's all over with, I don't have to worry about that anymore, my kids are grown--and worry about other problems. And I don't think--I'm very negative about women in--especially women in government. I don't think they carry the clout that they need. And I don't think they ever will. Which is a very bad thing for me to say because--. I'm not a feminist, but I think I tend to look at the world as it sits there and spins in the universe, and it's just not going to happen! Not until Ronald Reagan has a two-year-old that he's responsible for with no wife! Then he might take up and sit notice--or sit up and take notice! But it's not going to happen. I just don't think that they will ever have the kind of clout they need.

Reinhardt: And you're saying that women forget that easily?

Woman: Do you remember what it was like in high school? Do you remember everything about high school? Do you remember your best friend who had the car and you didn't? Now that

you've had your car for ten years? You don't remember what that felt like.

Merrow: The people that we talked with had all kinds of reasons for rejecting Bronfenbrenner's fantasy. But perhaps the most frightening one was distrust--not of Bronfenbrenner's ideas, but of their neighbor's good faith in carrying the ideas out.

Reinhardt: A common response was, "I'll only cut my workday to six hours if everyone else does. I don't want people to say I'm unprofessional." Or, "While I was using my extra time with my family, other people would cheat. They'd work on the side and get ahead of me."

Merrow: But Uri Bronfenbrenner remains undaunted. His fantasy goes on.

PREPOSTEROUS PROPOSITION 3

Bronfenbrenner: Oh, number three is the most preposterous of all. Number three--preposterous proposition number three is all these things I've been talking about and saying are impossible are about to come to pass.

Reinhardt: That is preposterous!

Bronfenbrenner: And you know why they're about to come to pass? They're about to come to pass because of the coming, and the already here but still growing, economic calamity that we're going to experience. Because, you know, we're not going to have as much money anymore. We're not going to be able to go running here and there. We're not going to be able to get in the car and spin off and take a vacation far away. We're going to have to stay home--stay home in our own town, stay home around the house. And it's going to be colder--we're going to have to cuddle and get together and talk to each other and rediscover that each other's company is sort of fun, and that there are interesting people right around you. And let me just indicate to you that I'm not--this isn't just fantasy. There is a very fascinating piece of research that was done by a colleague of mine now at Cornell. Glenn Elder wrote a book and I commend it to you. It's called Children of the Great Depression. And it's a study of the life course of those who were kids when the Great Depression hit. And what he finds--he follows them, you know, for decades--it's been a long time since the Great Depression occured--and he finds that there are two kinds of things that happen. First, it depends on how old you were when the depression hit, and what level of economic resources your family had when the depression hit. And if you were, let's say, anything from a preadolescent on, and if your family was reasonably well off, but then lost a lot so that you were just on the margin, compared to families that had the same income but whom the depression didn't hit so they kept their resources, the life history of these young people is much more fair--it was a good thing the depression. They had happier family lives, they were more--they got more education, they got better jobs, they earned more money, they had a happier life. Why? says Elder in this research. Well, as it turns out, that when the depression hit and

they had to sell the car, and the mother may have had to start to work, the kid would have to get a newspaper route, they all got together, they had to work together, and they got a spirit about it and all of a sudden when you were a kid you were doing meaningful things and people were appreciating you, and you got to appreciate each other. That's the happy side of the story. There's a tragic side to the story. The tragic side of the story is what happened to those who were already at the margin when the depression hit and the margin--wheeeeesh--they fell over the edge. That's a very sad story--harder to document. Death rates were higher, institutionalization, mental disturbances and the like. In our own studies right now, in the late 1970s these data were gathered, a very sobering thing. As income goes down, we would ask our families to describe their children--these were all preschool kids. And we would say, "We've been talking about Mary and Johnny, tell us what are they like?" And then we would jot this down and then look at these descriptions to see whether they saw their kids in positive terms or less positive terms. We found that once your income drops below $10,000 or so, in our times, you cease beginning to describe your child in positive terms. And it's more serious than that. I have some newspaper clippings here--in our society you only get them on the back pages--you find on these back pages stories of what's happening with those families. Child abuse goes up, mental disturbance goes up, suicides go up. In the American world, to lose your job is a terrible, terrible blow. And it's especially destructive on families with young children. And that's happening now, and it's--there's a conspiracy of silence about it. It's as if everything was perfectly all right. Now, so my third preposterous prediction is somewhat two-sided. It could have a happy ending if we opened our eyes to what--to the tunnel vision that we now have. If we actively addressed the plight of those families where the breadwinner is losing the job. Because there are a number of studies--and what happens there is--particularly if it's the man who loses the job--we in our American society tend to blame the individual. "You've lost your job, you can't--." And he begins to blame himself.

Reinhardt: Something wrong with him? He's a failure--

Bronfenbrenner: He's a failure--something wrong. The notion that--that the system somehow hasn't been sensibly organized so that he wouldn't have to lose his job--and I've indicated that could be done--we have the resources, and, you know, we're no longer the richest country in the world but, Gee, we've got lots of--if we were--if we applied good old Yankee ingenuity we could work it out.

Reinhardt: Now you said in your third preposterous proposition that it--it is going to happen now.

Bronfenbrenner: I said that it is going to happen now. But I'm now adding a condition. You see, if all we do is to let the thing happen and it will have a salutary effect, as I said, on the well-to-do by sort of reminding them of life's realities--if however the well-to-do, the relatively well-to-do, are not paying attention to what's happening to the folks who really get hit--nobody is going to sit there

silently and watch their kids not have enough food. And in our research project in Syracuse we already know some families that are cut down from three meals to two meals a day. Not many, not many, it's early yet. Well, now nobody's going to let that happen to their kids and just sit there. And we're going to have to move.

Reinhardt: Now how are we going to move? Is it just simply by going to three-quarter time and putting women in decision making--

Bronfenbrenner: There will have to be a lot of things done. Let me remind you. We did make it in the depression, the Great Depression. Remember how radical those changes were. And they were very imaginative, and some of them were crazy ideas but we made it. And the reason we made it is that we recognized that this was a terrible time, that this was the time that tried men's souls. Well, we've got one like that now.

Reinhardt: You have to feel the pain first?

Bronfenbrenner: We seem to. Now, please understand, other modern industrialized societies have recognized this reality. They've got all kinds of schemes in place--18 percent of German industry is on flextime. All these other countries have these for example. Almost every other modern industrialized nation--when your kid gets sick, you can take sick leave. Not in the United States, thank you. You've got to be sick yourself to take sick leave. So what happens is we're, you know, turned into liars--in any case we're guilt-ridden you know. Either we lie and say "I'm sick" so you can take care of your kid, and then you feel guilty about that, or you say, I just can't afford it--I can't afford losing my job, so you go to work and you feel guilty because you left the sick kid with, you know, running with a temperature and the neighbor who has promised to drop by or whatever it is. Well, that's crazy, that's crazy. And it isn't necessary. And I think we have to come to recognize that. Part of it is the problem that we've forgotten about this caring business. Species Homo sapiens are social animals. As an old teacher of mine said, "He's a chip off the old block, not because he was knocked off it, but because he knocked around with it!" See? And that's how we learn. Now, that process has been eroded because there are so few opportunities. Now, once we recreate the opportunities, or create them anew, why then we'll discover that there are a lot of talents and skills around that we didn't know we had. The only question is, will we do it soon enough?

Merrow: Dr. Uri Bronfenbrenner, psychologist and sociologist, but today, for us, a dreamer.

Reinhardt: Transcripts and cassettes of this Options in Education program are available. The printed transcript costs two dollars, the cassette recording costs six dollars.

Merrow: Our ordering procedure has changed. Now you call this toll free number. 800 253 0808.

Reinhardt: A transcript, two dollars, a cassette six dollars,

and the toll free number, 800 253 0808. That's how to get copies of this program. If you want to tell us how you feel about Uri Bronfenbrenner's ideas, or maybe give us a few ideas of your own, write to us at National Public Radio--Education, Washington, D. C., 20036.

Merrow: Options in Education is a coproduction of National Public Radio and the Institute for Educational Leadership of the George Washington University.

Reinhardt: Support for the series is provided by the National Institute of Education and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. In fact, the National Institute of Education has just awarded Options in Education another grant. We appreciate the vote of confidence.

Merrow: We'd like to share some other news. Our series on adolescent pregnancy and our series on severely handicapped children have just won Odyssey awards. Our series on school desegregation, "Race Against Time," has won the New York Bar Association award.

Reinhardt: Options in Education is produced by John Merrow. Mary Rowse is our associate producer, and Rebecca Goldfield is our assistant producer.

Merrow: Barbara Reinhardt serves as cohost and reporter and we've had engineering assistance from Greg Hedgepath and Craig Laird. I'm John Merrow.

Reinhardt: I'm Barbara Reinhardt. And this is NPR--National Public Radio.